

ARISTOTLE GOES STRATEGIC. OLD MEDIA MEETS NEW

By Peter Thompson, ANZSOG Fellow, and Anni Rowland-Campbell, Director, Intersticia.

Occasional Paper ANZSOG / SSA Victoria

As the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, once observed, there is nothing more practical than a good theory. This short paper addresses how a few simple ideas about communication and strategy can be put to work for you.

We look at three things. Firstly, we examine Aristotle's great insights into the art of persuasion. Aristotle's thoughts about *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are as relevant to the *Gruen Transfer* generation as they were in his day. They remain the fundamental building block for setting out an argument on policy.

Secondly, we explore how Aristotle's teachings apply to thinking about strategy, in particular to Harvard Kennedy School professor Mark Moore's conception of the task environment faced by the public manager.

And, thirdly, we consider how a robust communication strategy needs to integrate both new and old media.

Aristotle's persuasive method

Aristotle was what these days might be called a 'renaissance man', except that the renaissance came along a millennium and a half after he lived! Aristotle lived in Athens in the fourth century BC. No idler, he would spend his mornings speculating and adding to the gross sum of human knowledge. And then, in the Agora or assembly place beneath the Acropolis of Athens, he would spend his afternoons teaching people to speak. He kept this up for 12 years. His teaching principles were recorded in a book, *The Art of Rhetoric*, which is available in various English translations.

One of Aristotle's most useful insights was to grasp a method for framing persuasive arguments. He made a distinction between *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. What do these terms mean? Now language is never frozen and the meaning of these words is not fixed. So – for simplicity's sake – our definition of these words narrows their wider meaning in order to make them useful for constructing a policy argument.

I take *ethos* to mean 'values'. What values underpin your proposal? What are the principles at stake? What social norm is operating in this context? What is the right thing to do? Values may include appeals to concepts such as rights, responsibilities, ethics, fairness, justice, transparency, accountability, precedents, compassion, efficiency, safety, a code of conduct and reasonable expectations of government – to name a few. On the other side of the coin, violating these principles may damage reputation or trust in public authority. The policy advocate needs to clearly identify what value/s apply in the case being put and state it in their argument. Values do not exist in a vacuum. The audience makes its own judgment about whether the advocate and their organisation lives by the values espoused and is credible and authentic in communicating them. It may be

necessary for the advocate to argue that where there are competing values at stake, one needs to take precedence over another.

I take *pathos* to mean 'emotions'. Emotions drive actions. What do people feel about the problem or issue? What are the deeply held emotions that underlie the need for action? What is motivating people? What do people want? Do people feel fear or courage? Aggression or passivity? Happiness or misery? Anger or acceptance? Anxiety or calmness? Engagement or disinterest? Caring or aloofness? Resolve or apathy? Surprise or expectation? Disgust or desire? Optimism or pessimism? Confidence or uncertainty? Bullish or bearish?

Power to influence others comes from knowing and identifying the emotions that motivate the collective will to act. Whether on the share market or in the marketplace for votes, *pathos* matters a great deal because it drives impulses. And, as opinion polls attest, sentiment swings from week to week.

Emotions are, of course, malleable and the effective advocate seeks to win over the sentiment of the audience. Every sales person, every advertising agent sets out to discover the emotional hook that will sway the potential buyer. The same applies to making a political sale. As Carl Jung said of Hitler, he magnified the inaudible whisper in the German ear. Hitler, like other charismatic speakers, was able to manipulate and change the emotional state of his audience.

Pathos, then, refers to the mostly involuntary emotional responses to what we encounter in our environment. We can't easily stop our emotional responses in the same way that we can't voluntarily stop our heartbeat or breathing. *Ethos* is in a different category. It is the set of values that underpin our moral universe. As such, these principles are actively chosen by us and are matters for judgement rather than objective truths that are provable in themselves. *Logos* is different again in that it obeys the rules of the rational world of argument.

I take *logos* to mean 'reason' and 'logic'. If a public policy proposal is driven by *pathos*, based on principles of *ethos*, the question remains what should be done? What is the best answer? What is the solution to the problem? What are the rational arguments in favour of action or inaction? What are the costs and benefits or rational gains and losses that may be incurred? How do we weigh the evidence? What does science tell us? Why is one solution better than another? What is the fix? How can the logical objections to the proposed course of action be answered?

So – taken together – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* become the three elements that 'frame' an effective argument or case for action. None of the parts should be omitted. They don't need to be given equal time or space in an argument yet they are vital in a Gestalt or holistic way in the making of meaning.

Developing an argument based on these three principles of persuasion can go something like this:

Pathos: People are driven by...

Ethos: We believe in...

Logos: We reason that...

Strategy

Let's turn our minds to how ideas about *rhetoric* enmesh with notions about strategy. Mark Moore and his Kennedy School colleagues formulated the concept of a strategic triangle involving three elements of the 'task environment' in which the public manager toils. At its core is the public manager's endless pursuit of defining and delivering 'public value' through a process of mobilising 'legitimacy' and 'resources'. It is strategic thinking about means and ends.

Public value is, to put it the other way around, something of substantive value to the public. Public value is to the public sector what a value proposition is to a corporation. It represents the 'offer' contained in a public policy or the mission, purpose, objective or goal being pursued. Aristotle used the word, *telos*, to refer to such ends. The advocate argues the case for the public value proposition using *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos*. For example, "the public feels motivated to act by feelings (*pathos*); we stand by important values in judging what to do (*ethos*), and rationally speaking, this is the best solution (*logos*)."

Pathos + Ethos + Logos = Case for Public Value or Telos.

In our democratic system, actions must be based on legitimacy and accountability. So, the advocate must argue the case for public value in what Moore calls the 'authorising environment'. It is in the authorising environment that the contest is played out with political 'opponents' who seek to promote an alternative conception of public value, using different notions of *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos*. Using another Greek term, the authorising environment is the domain of the *demos* or people deliberating and deciding for themselves on their preferred choice of public value.

The third element of Moore's strategic triangle relates to questions of mobilising resources to get the work done. It's not enough to articulate fine objectives and win legitimacy for action, if their ultimate realisation falls short at the strategic hurdle of administrative feasibility. How does the public manager organise the 'capacity' or 'capability' to deliver on promised public value? What logistics are required for delivering on the sought after public value? How is the machinery of government harnessed? What partnerships are envisaged and/or co-production with non-government suppliers? We refer to these strategic efforts by the Greek word, *ergon*, a term used by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It refers to function, work or task. Developing a strategic plan on how to deliver public value is itself one such task requiring resources and capability.

So, with public value defined in terms of Aristotle's *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos*; and the principles of a strategy set out to gain legitimacy and organise capability; the public manager confronts a new set of practical problems. How do you communicate your message?

Old media meets new

It used to be that government communication efforts were a mixture of media releases, television and radio interview opportunities sought for the minister, and carefully worded articles strategically placed in key tabloids and even trade journals, not to mention the occasional friendly lunch with journalists.

Now the communications landscape has become much more complicated. We live in a world where all stakeholders, including employees, can easily self-publish and use social networks to share with a global audience utilising digital media and Web 2.0 technologies. This results in a shift of control away from the hierarchies of the Minister's office and the department to citizens.

There are three converging trends which are radically changing the information landscape and any strategic approach to communications needs to continuously bear these in mind.

Firstly, data and information are now largely in digital format. This means that the ways in which that information can be created, stored, accessed and shared are vastly different. Documents can now be stored remotely in "the cloud" and disseminated at the click of a mouse. They can be replicated infinitely. They can be encrypted and coded but equally hacked and seamlessly altered.

Secondly, Web 2.0 technologies mean that citizens can easily generate and publish content of all kinds, from books and music to videos, and then share it with others via social networks. We now have the world of the "producer-consumer" where an individual can publish to the world. As Tim O'Reilly says, Web 2.0 is both a "platform" and a service that gets better as more people use it. Communication is now built on the "architecture of participation".

Thirdly, digital content is now accessible any place, any time and on any digitally connected device. We are in the world of "ubiquitous computing". This means that information can no longer be locked up inside corporate walls, physical or otherwise, but can, and will, be taken with people wherever they go. In the digital age, information flows through networks which means that all organisations, including governments, will need to behave like "network enterprises" rather than a series of disconnected silos.

These three trends – digitisation, socialisation and ubiquity - are leading to a revolution in how societies operate. As Alvin Toffler said, "the link between communication and character is complex, but unbreakable. We cannot transform all our media of communication and expect to remain unchanged as people. A revolution in the media must mean a revolution in the psyche."

New media is changing the demand for transparency and openness. Organisations are being held accountable for both decisions and the decision making process itself. Consumers and citizens are recognising their own role as "co-creators" who collaborate among themselves, and are demanding to become informal partners in innovation around policy formulation as well as in creating goods and services.

A wider communication mandate

The skilled communicator in the twenty first century needs to understand that digital technologies necessitate that each message be crafted for an increasingly complex and information rich audience. That audience includes those who are digitally literate, and can access that information anytime and anywhere, to those who have virtually no access at all. The only way to meet this challenge is to proactively engage in a conversation with citizens, and to listen more, rather than rely on issuing one-way statements.

Thus, rather than acting in a limited functionary role as the distribution channel for government messages, the mandate of the public communicator expands to that of a custodian of public trust facilitating the flow of knowledge and information between government and citizens. In this role the public communicator becomes an interlocutor, someone who actively takes part in a dialogue in order to both educate and to facilitate the relationship between government and citizens.

The digital world is placing far greater demands on us all in terms of information management. But the trick is to remember that humans are still humans. We are still driven by the same needs and emotions as we always have been. It is just that those are now far easier to express and understand, see, hear and respond.

References:

Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Penguin, 1991

Berman, S. J. and R. Bell, *Digital transformation: Creating new business models where digital meets physical*, IBM Institute for Business Value. Somers, New York, 2011

Boyd, Danah, *Transparency Is Not Enough*, Gov 2.0 Expo, Washington DC, 2010.

Moore Mark H, *Creating Public Value: Strategic management in government*, Harvard, 1995.

O'Reilly, T. (2005), *What is Web 2.0?*, O'Reilly Radar

http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/09/what_is_web_20.htmlhttp://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/09/what_is_web_20.html 2011.

Tapscott, D. and A. D. Williams, *Wikinomics - How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, Penguin Group, New York, 2006

Thompson Peter, *Persuading Aristotle*, Allen and Unwin, 1998.

Toffler, Alvin, *The Third Wave*, Pan Books, 1980.